GRACE AND GRATITUDE ⊛
Luke 17:11-19
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⊛ not included in HC BS Pulpit ..

One of the primal, formative experiences for most of us was being told by parents, over and over again, to say "thank you." ~~Think about it for a minute. How and where and when did you learn gratitude? Part of the pattern is that~~ From the time we were old enough to understand and form words into sentences we were ordered to say it. Whether we felt it: whether we knew what it was we were supposed to be feeling was quite beside the point. The goal was simply to build into us the nearly automatic responsive syndrome which would result in our always, under every circumstance, saying "thank you."

Sometimes it was overdone. "God is great, God is good, let us thank him for this food," after several thousand incantations loses something, to say the least. And it doesn't even rhyme, unless you had a venerable great uncle like I had who actually said - "let us thank him for this food (as in wood), which alway set my brother and me to giggling when on occasion we dined at his table. But it didn't hurt us, and for social grace it is a good idea to cultivate the habit of ritual gratitude.

However, a modest conclusion of mine is that gratitude is a bit more profound than a ritual "thank you": and that it cannot be coerced. You either feel it or you don't. You are either grateful or u grateful and saying the words isn't likely to make much difference. Learning gratitude, rather, is theological. ⊛ We should cut over
It has something to do with the discovery, which can be unwelcome, that we are not all-sufficient: that others have

things we don't have and in giving us those things inevitably exercise a kind of power over us. And that, I would submit, is theological discovery, not just good table manners. In fact, it is the learning that the good life is grace. But first, let's look again at the Scripture.

The story is simple and to the point. Jesus was on his way somewhere between Galilee and Samaria. At the outskirts of a village he encountered a small leper colony. Ten men, afflicted by this physically deforming and socially debilitating disease, called to him for mercy. He instructed them to report to the local priest, presumably to verify that they were clean, healed. As they made their way to the Synagogue they were healed. One of them turned around and came back and thanked Jesus: the one who was a Samaritan. Jesus asked: "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"

That doesn't require much exposition. Ten men were given an incredible gift, a whole new lease on life. One was grateful: nine were not. One was motivated to return to the giver of the gift to say "thank you": nine neglected to do so regardless of what they were feeling. Obviously our Lord thought that the one man had responded appropriately. The subtle part of this ~~little~~ vignette comes next - in what Jesus said to this man. "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well." Weren't the other nine healed as thoroughly as this one? What did he mean? Wholeness - healing - I would submit - includes the grace of gratitude. The other nine, in neglecting to be

grateful, had not really been healed. They had not truly received the gift Jesus tried to give them.

Robert Louis Stevenson once wrote, "The man who has forgotten to be thankful has fallen asleep in life." Karl Barth on the same subject observed, "If the essence of God is grace then the essence of man is gratitude. In other words, to be truly, fully human is to be a person of gratitude." (Models for Ministers, 10/23/77) And Doctor Hans Selye, discussing emotional health: "Among all the emotions, there is one which, more than any other, accounts for the absence or presence of stress in human relations: that is the feeling of gratitude..." (Ibid)

Robert McAfee Brown, one of the contemporary theologians who consistently stimulates me, wrote an essay several years ago on the subject of gratitude in which he echoed Karl Barth - that the distinctive word in the Christian vocabulary is grace. The word that describes the distinctive Christian response to God, according to Brown, is gratitude. And then Brown talks about a hymn: Nun Danket, "Now Thank We All Our God:" Now there is much that I love about Thanksgiving. I'm in love with gray November Days, and the exquisite aroma of turkey, and the excitement of a fire in the fireplace in the morning, and the football games, and all the memories; but more than anything else, I'm in love with the music - the hymns. The Thanksgiving Hymns, for my money, are the best in Protestantism: they are, I find, good theology and good music. And so - when Robert McAfee Brown writes about Nun Danket I sit up and take notice. Let me share a little vintage Brown with you:

"It is a hymn that seems to be the appropriate one for every occasion of worship. I find myself wanting to use it at the conclusion of every sermon I preach, so that it will confirm the fact of the good news, in case my own proclamation has been faulty. It is the hymn that seems most appropriate after a baptism. It is the hymn that gathers up our sense of gratitude after a wedding. It is the hymn par excellence to be sung after we have celebrated the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, the very service of Thanksgiving and gratitude. It is the appropriate hymn to sing before or after a meal, and in fact was originally written to be sung as a grace. It is the hymn that I fervently hope will be sung at my funeral. It is the hymn that sums up what our reaction to the Gospel must be, and describes what kind of people we must be because of the Gospel." (The Pseudonyms of God, p. 14)

We'll sing that hymn a little later: for now listen carefully to the words -

Now thank we all our God With heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things hath done, In whom His world rejoices;
Who, from our mothers' arms, Hath blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love, And still is ours today.
O may this bounteous God Through all our life be near us,
With ever joyful hearts And blessed p ace to cheer us;
And keep us in His grace, And guide us when perplexed,
And free us from all ills In this world and the next.

All praise and thanks to God The Father now be given,
The Son, and Him who reigns With Them in highest heaven,
The one eternal God, Whom earth and heaven adore;
For thus it was, is now, And shall be evermore. Amen.

I love that hymn. Whoever wrote it really knew what gratitude was. He must have been sitting in his den, before a roaring ire, in the bosom of his family, smelling the tantalizing aroma of the turkey. In fact - and now we're going to learn something about gratitude - it was written by a German Bishop named Martin Rinkart around 1636. I am sure you recognize the date as somewhere in the midst of what we know as the Thirty Years War. I discovered that Rinkert's village became a haven for refugees and fugitives and defeated soldiers. Quickly the village became terribly overcrowded and then unsanitary. Soon people began to get hungry and sick and they started to die. Rinkart discovered that he was the only clergyman around. During one siege he read burial rites for from forty to fifty people per day. Rinkert buried 4,500 people in all, one of whom was his wife.

That's the man who wrote "Now Thank We All Our God, who wondrous things hath done." And that, friends, is a clue to the nature of gratitude.

I continue to experience discomfort at the easy way we ~~customarily~~ hang our gratitude on the hook of massive affluence. Now, if you are well and healthy and at peace you should be grateful; humbly and profoundly grateful. But if your gratitude is rooted only in what you have now, it is a very

fragile phenomenon. In fact, gratitude for things can become arrogant, self-congratulation terribly quickly. It can force an inevitable comparison with those who do not have what we have, and an almost irresistable conclusion that we have it because we deserve it and they don't have it because they don't deserve it. The fact that there are people dying of starvation at this moment - all over the world - and the dis - ease one feels when reminded of that fact - is simply the price a person must pay who wishes to be alive to the imperatives of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. God doesn't intend that: God wants his special people to do something about that - and we really haven't gotten around to addressing it yet: not really. Gratitude is far more profound.than saying thanks to God for a full refrigerator and a warm house and an adequate bank account. It has something to do with the way you and I relate to our creator and to our fellows regardless of what we happen to be owning and using and consuming at the moment.

Gratitude is acknowledging that someone else has what I don't have: that my life is enriched when that person gives me what he or she has. ~~It is the theologically~~ Theologically it is the confession that there are other "I's" in the world besides the I that is me. It is a step away from the egotism that is our sin. Seward Hiltner, of P inceton Seminary, observes that there seems to be a "moratorium on gratitude" in our society at this time. He writes: "In a Black Man, gratitude looks like Uncle Tom. In a teen-ager, it looks like middle class conventionalism. In a worker, it looks like denial of his own rights. And in women, it looks increasingly like an

acceptance of the male - dominated status quo." (Theological Dynamics, p. 51)

He's right, of course. The individual has been reborn in the upheavals of the mid-twentieth century. In the Civil Rights and Black Identity movements, poverty organizations, native American sit-ins, the whole feminist movement, the individual has stood up and said "I am me and I'm not about to be pushed around any longer," that impetus is rightly a part of God's will for the health and wholeness of each one of his children. But somewhere in the midst of it all we have p omised more than the individual can deliver. We are who we are in relationship. We are given our identity by others. We can only claim so much of it alone and then we hav to start talking about mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters and children - or even the enemy in opposition to whom I know who I am. There is no such thing as a self-made person, no matter who is claiming the title. The wholeness and healing of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is in knowing that and confessing that: in turning to the person who gave us a gift and saying "thank you."

To be grateful is to acknowledge that life is grace: that in the purist sense we stand strongly as individuals when we know that we cannot and do not stand alone: that in the truest sense of all we are given everything we have. It begins, I propose, on a level so elementary that it is difficult to articulate. Life itself is a gift: no one of us called ourselves into being: rather we were loved into life by a man and woman and God. The world is a gift: the sun comes up

every morning: the seasons change in silent rythmn: the perpetual cycle of birth, growth, death and rebirth is a miracle of dependability and faithfulness so awesome we don't even see it. My father was not, in any sense of the word, a very pious man. But as frequently as he could he began each summer morning sitting on a bench in the back yard watching the sun come up and listening to the birds and drinking coffee. He told me once that he thanked God for that: the summer sun and singing birds: the gift of this new day. And I've often reflected that there was deep and profound theological truth in that.

One of my favorite stories is of an old and wise musician who was asked "what's the good news for today?" His response was utterly profound and utterly gracious. He walked over to his tuning fork, tapped it and said, "There is the good news for today. That, my friend, is A. It was A all day yesterday. It will be A all day tomorrow, next week and for a thousand years. The soprano upstairs warbles off key, the tenor next door flats his high ones, and the piano across the hall is out of time. ~~Noise all around me, noise.~~ but that, my friend, is A." (Wallace Hamilton, Who Goes There, p. 67-68)

We are given a universe that is stable, dependable and for the eyes of faith, full of the grace of God. We are given a nation: a system of government, a history, a people. The best patriotism is not an arrogant nationalism, but simple gr titude to those who have gone before.

We are given other people. They come to us, each one of them, as a special gift of God. What a difference it would make if we could see them all that way: as God's gift to us. And what a profound and healthy difference if in our marriages and families and most intimate relationship we could begin to say thank you: thank you for what you give to me: thank you for being you.

cup of coffee - pay check for looking so nice -

We Christians bring to the festival of Thanksgiving an added understanding. We know our God as a God of grace. We know the good news that his love is consistant: that he loves us and is with us no matter what we have or don't have. In sickness and in health: in life and death: in good times and bad times he will be our God.

That's how it all began. With brave but lonely pilgrims on the New England Coast - sure of nothing but God's faithfu ness. And with Lincoln watching the forces of hatred tear the union asunder, sure of nothing but God's faithfulness. God's promise is that he will be faithful: he will loy us: and be with us: and for that, this day and every day, "Now Thank We All Our God."

The whole matter was put into perspective for me by a charming story I read this week. Fulton Oursler, the writer, once reminisced about his experience as a little boy. The OUrsler family servant, Ann, taught him everything he knew about religion, he said. She told him Bible stories and taught him the Lord's prayer. One day as they ate together he saw her bow her head and whi per "Much obliged, dear Lord,

for the vittles." The little boy asked, "Ann, what's a vittle?" She replied: "It's what I eat and drink." "But you'd get your vittles," Oursler said, "whether you thanked the Lord or not." And Ann replied, "But it makes everything taste better to be thankful." (Expository Times, July, 1977, p. 301)

That, it seems to me, is not unlike the words our Lord said to the one man who returned to thank him. "Rise and go on your way. Your faith has made you well." Amen.

Father and God, you are the giver of every good gift. Be at our tables: be in the midst of our family celebrations: be near when we are alone: make our celebrating holy with your presence. Hear our gratitude: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.